

Small Town HPC Challenges

Central Savannah River Area (13 counties, 41 cities surrounding Augusta)

Four active city HPCs that undertake design review with COA's:

Each has a paid staff member to handle HPC duty and is assigned one or more other duties such as code enforcement, building inspection, main street, or downtown development authority.

Populations are 6,778, 5,766, 4,132, 2,850

The smallest city said their greatest challenge with the HPC was twofold:

- 1) Education of the general public about what the HPC is and what it is supposed to do
- 2) Misinformation from people who live in a locally designated district and from elected officials

This city staff member said that if you are a chair or member of an HPC that you represent the local government as a standing committee of local government. You must not advocate personal causes for historic preservation. The HPCs job is to follow the rules and approve or disapprove the COAs. Treat each case separately and don't make a precedent of a former COA.

Be sure to the best of your ability to have a diverse representation of members in their skills: teacher who teaches drafting, construction manager, a realtor, and a retired teacher of history.

Of the three larger cities two have the least experienced HPC staff members who have learned a lot over the past couple of years. Since the time they came on as HPC staff person, the building inspection department was very reluctant to send people applying for a residential building permit to the HPC staff member to get a COA package, even though the map with the historic district was in the office where permitting is done. The building inspector knew most of the contractors applying and was basically not making them go through this extra layer. The city manager had to get involved with one city and the situation has stopped.

Another city has issues with elected officials interfering. One house was having the windows being removed and the building inspector stopped the contractor. The owner complained about having to go through the COA process because her husband had just died. The city council member told the building inspector to let them finish and then go through the COA process and approve the COA. The building inspector said, "not on my watch." He just backed off. So this city's HPC staff says, "Don't cheat and be too lenient."

Another issue is just not wanting to go through the COA process. In one city a citizen is considering buying a house that is supposed to close. House needs a lot of updating. Citizen wants to tear down a structure in the rear and put up a pre-designed metal building. Citizen is not interested in going through the COA process and may back down.

Same city staff says that he wants the city to give those who keep up their historic properties a break with a 2 or 3% tax break on their property taxes. He said that the cost of painting one of the houses, going down to the wood so that you don't have an alligator effect was \$38,000. This was also treating and painting the metal roof.

City staff also said that they were going to organize a meet and greet for those in the district to answer questions and meet those on the HPC. They had written a letter to those who live in the

district, gotten the envelopes and labels finished, and the letter was not approved by the elected officials as the government changed.

Another problem is that contractors would rather pay fines for not getting a COA rather than apply for the COA. The price of the fine was raised and this put a stop to most of it.

Cities said that realtors were not educating the buyers of their houses that being located in the historic district meant going through the COA process for design review. Three cities said they have problems with this one.

We used to give out a sample letter that could be sent to all owners and tenants in a local district once a year or every other year reminding them of such. And this letter or a modified version could be sent to realtors as well.

One of the cities had a major incident, a company called F2, a defense contract company that needed a lot of security for the business, purchased a house for a business and both the realtor and building inspector had not done their job of notifying the owner of the design review process. The HPC staff person made the building inspector stop the construction in the historic house which, by this time, the contractor had removed the windows and doors. The HPC staff member said that the end result was that the contractor was embarrassed about what happened and went through the COA process before proceeding. The HPC staff member said that the company ended up doing a great job with the house. PHOTO

Term limits: Finding people who are dedicated, knowledgeable, and will attend regular HPC meetings. One of the Cities was telling the HPC staff member to get fresh new faces. Younger people have families and children. Younger members are often in the hauling stage with obligations and for many reasons do not come to meetings. Plus, often both parents are trying to work. Two cities said that they have two members who have been on as members forever, but they do not want them to leave the HPC. They did suggest trying to find a new member from a Historical Society or Genealogical Society (if they exist in your community). Or, retired teachers association.

Also, I have preached that the HPC member must have their primary residence in the city where the local district is located, so that they live within the jurisdiction of the local government. An HPC member for a city cannot live in the county and own their business downtown and be a legal member of the HPC. However, two of the four HPCs are still doing that.

One thing I do like is that one of the larger HPCs gives an award for the best preservation project in the city. They give a certificate and the newspaper writes an article about the historic property and what's been done.

Another problem is that two HPCs don't meet unless they have a COA to review. It cuts down on meetings but also creates a somewhat stagnant situation.

Staff approvals of some COAs are a good thing when it creates less work for all. But, it needs to be spelled out in your Bylaws/Rules of Procedure that you can do this and what it is for.

Small Town Challenges
CSRA RC area (4 active HPCs)

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 1. HPCs job is to follow the rules and approve or disapprove the COAs. Must not advocate personal causes for historic preservation.
 2. Do have a diverse representation of members
 3. Make sure the COA process is working for your community – that the departments are cooperating.
 4. Do not let elected officials interfere with the COA process, thereby limiting how staff can perform their job to keep the historic district intact.
 5. Do not let contractors circumvent the COA system and pay fines to avoid regulation. Up the price!
 6. Everyone needs education as a reminder to preserve the historic district – the public on the city's website, letters to owners in the districts, contractors, and realtors.
 7. Term Limits – do what works, but keep in mind the legality of the term limits.

Incentives:

1. Encourage local government to have an incentive for preservation maintenance – percent of taxes as a discount.
2. Meet & Greet event for those in the district to ask questions and learn how important the COA process is for the local district preservation.
3. Send a letter to owners or put on the website a map and reminders of where the district is located and COA process and who to contact.